Kristy Mackeil

998785934

Rosalie Griffith

Annotated Text Set

**Examining Identity Crises and Character Typecasts in Contemporary High School Literature**

The ten literary sources that comprise this text set serve to examine varying interpretations of what it means to be a high school student in today’s generation. The collection of texts chosen employ a variety of different social and cultural lenses to account for the dynamic and often inconsistent social climate that exists in secondary schools. Pressure to belong to the ‘in’ crowds by appealing to a certain image, using drugs and alcohol recreationally, becoming sexually active and even physically or mentally abusing others is an issue that is all too prevalent in our society. Teens are under more pressure than ever to adhere to certain standards in accordance with the expectations set out by the media and by their peers. As a result we have witnessed the continual rise of bullying and teen suicide in the last decade.

Therefore, I propose the development of a literary anthology, which deconstructs secondary school syndicates and appropriates the struggle of individual identity. In order to examine these ideas through a variety of narrative lenses the suggested anthology includes both fiction and non-fiction works, films, a musical, a graphic novel, a documentary, a how to guide, visual art in the form of a yearbook, and an internet medium. Collectively, these sources can be used to guide students through an examination of the social constructs which determine the sense of hostility, fear, kinship, and conflict that is all too prevalent in most high school settings. This examination of social dynamics will provide students with the skills necessary to deconstruct ‘high school myths’ and name various character typecasts, thus allowing students to see beyond superficial surfaces and formulate a deeper understanding of high school dynamics, both in literature and in the media.

**1. Fiction**

***Inventing Elliot* by Graham Gardner**

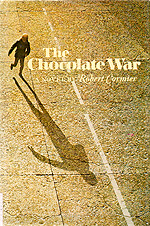
**Summary:**

In Graham Gardner's debut novel, fourteen-year old Elliot Sutton is determined to reinvent himself when he starts the academic year at his new school, Holminster High. Elliot was picked on and beaten up by bullies at his old school. He wants to make sure that he doesn't get noticed in the wrong way ever again. As a result, he wears the right clothes, changes his hairstyle and acts very cool. Much to his surprise, his plan succeeds and Elliot is noticed by the Guardians, a secret society of students who run the school by terrorizing and bullying students. Their organization is loosely based on George Orwell's book 1984. The Guardians would like Elliot to join them. Not wanting to get hurt again, Elliot goes along with them but soon finds out that he will have to pay a terrible price for his new position of power.

**Rationale:**

This text is a narrative of self-discovery, which employs sensitive subject matter to make a serious point about the fear of transition and “fitting in” many high school students experience. Gardner’s descriptive narrations allow the reader to experience Elliot’s pain both emotionally and physically as most of his actions are driven by fear. This fictional narrative supports this anthology’s examination of the type of identity crisis many youths and adolescent’s experience under the immense pressure of their peers. It also employs strong character dynamics and typecasts to portray the guardians as a powerful, thuggish group of bullies who dominate the school by instilling fear into those who do not identify with the group. It is because of his affiliation with this group that the reader notices some controversial changes in Elliot’s character. Consequently, this fictional story contains an important message for teens about the internal struggle the protagonist falls privy to after surrendering to conformity.

**2. Fiction**

***The Chocolate War***

**by Robert Cormier**

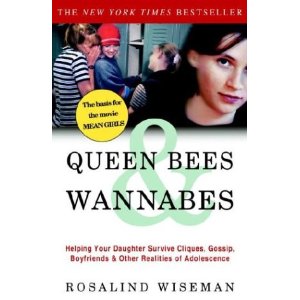
**Summary:**

Jerry is a high school freshman who one day makes a decision that's unpopular among his classmates-and it will change his whole life. Jerry's persistence and determination not only catches the attention of an elite group of bullies, but also from the corrupt administration of the school. The novel's protagonist Jerry Renault is a self-determined and solitary freshman at the corrupt private Catholic preparatory high school, Trinity. Throughout the novel, in addition to occasional [sexual frustration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_frustration), Jerry frequently ponders basic existential questions, both signified in part by a quotation posted inside his locker: "Do I dare disturb the universe?" from [T. S. Eliot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._S._Eliot)'s "[The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Love_Song_of_J._Alfred_Prufrock)." At Trinity, The Vigils, a secret, student-run society, maintain a degree of control by giving their peers "assignments" that range from ridiculous to cruel. Though the Vigils are nominally led by the athletic star boxer John Carter, it is the intelligent and manipulative Archie Costello who exerts the most influence over the group.

**Rationale:**

Graham Gardner has said that he could not have written *Inventing Elliot* in the way that he did without the lead set by *The Chocolate Wa*r. The two books are similar in that they both feature a school ruled by a secret society, but also very different because of the contrasting actions of their respective protagonists. The protagonist of *The Chocolate War* is a boy who decides to take a stand against conformity. Unlike *Inventing Elliot, the Chocolate War’s* main theme is the defiance of authority. This novel also examines the role administrative authority can play in controlling or promoting student power dynamics. Moreover, It looks exclusively at the power struggles that occur between teenage boys in a school setting. This novel has been highly scrutinized for its graphic detail and for the protagonist’s sexual ponderings; however, it is an effective medium through which to examine the cultural normalization of masculinity and power in a secondary school setting.

**3. Non Fiction**

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***Queen Bees and Wannabes***

**By Rosalind Wiseman**

**Summary:**

This non-fiction piece focuses on the ways in which girls in high schools form [cliques](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clique), patterns of aggressive teen girl behavior and how to deal with them. The book was, in large part, the basis for the movie [*Mean Girls*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mean_Girls) (2004).

Wiseman, who founded a nonprofit company dedicated to empowering teens, calls on her extensive face-to-face research with teens in this book that exposes the social minefields of female adolescence and the deep scarring that can result. Wiseman also gives an excellent overview of the common patterns of aggressive teen girl behavior with an increased focus on a parent-teacher audience, offering valuable practical advice, including how to talk about hard issues like sexual harassment. She also offers admirable, groundbreaking insight into an all-too-common issue and will be invaluable to any adult struggling to help a girl get through her teens.

**Rationale:**

*Mean Girls* is a medium, which has been included in this canon, and it is also not unreasonable to assume that many students will have already at some point viewed this film. Thus, it seems only reasonable to elaborate on the powerful message this satirical comedy perpetuates by examining the film’s roots. *Queen Bees & Wannabes* is a survival guide for both teenage girls and their parents. It makes a profound effort to account for the subtle, insidious style of bullying females normally participate in. The objective, or rather hope in including this book is that by deconstructing patterns of female aggression and behavior in secondary schools students will obtain an awareness of the harmful consequences these actions can provoke. Furthermore, students will remain more cognizant of the kind of typecasts and labels which are prevalent in both literature and in the media and which influence our understanding of social constructs, especially in a secondary school setting (i.e. jock, nerd, slut, queen-bee, punk, hipster etc.).

**4. Film (Comedy)**

***Mean Girls***

**Directed by Mark Waters, Screenplay by Tina Fey**

**Summary:**

*Mean Girls* is a 2004 American teen [comedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy) film and is based in part on the non-fiction book [*Queen Bees and Wannabes*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_Bees_and_Wannabes) by [Rosalind Wiseman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosalind_Wiseman), which describes how female [high school](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_school) social [cliques](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cliques) operate and the effect they can have on girls. Cady Heron ([Lindsay Lohan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lindsay_Lohan)), the 16-year-old [homeschooled](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeschooling) daughter of [zoologist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoologist) parents recently moved from [Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa), is unprepared for her first day of public high school at North Shore High School in [Evanston, Illinois](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evanston,_Illinois). With the help of social outcasts Janis ([Lizzy Caplan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lizzy_Caplan)) and Damien ([Daniel Franzese](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Franzese)), Cady learns about the various [cliques](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cliques). She is warned to avoid the school's most exclusive clique, the Plastics, the reigning trio of girls led by the acid-tongued [queen bee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queen_bee_(subculture)) Regina George ([Rachel McAdams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachel_McAdams)). After Cady overcomes a series of personal struggles while adjusting to life at North Shore, the film ends with the Plastics disbanding by the start of the new school year: Now reasonably well-liked, Cady reflects that the "Girl World" she lives in is at peace

**Rationale:**

*Mean Girls* attempts to account for the most obvious typecasts or cliques in a secondary school setting in a lighthearted, comedic way. The film makes a satirical attempt to convey the major challenges a high school student faces on any given day; challenges which include but are not limited to finding the perfect date, belonging to the right clique, avoiding bullies, being elected prom queen/king, finding a place to sit in the cafeteria, making friends etc. However the underlying message in the film is that the pressure to adhere to the unrealistic expectations set out for most high school students often results in an identity crisis of some kind wherein an individual struggles to adapt to their new surroundings and feels overwhelming pressure to reinvent themselves in a way which will make them more socially acceptable. Discussions of the film’s satirical nature in conjunction with observations made in their own school setting will encourage students to thinking critically and allow them to deconstruct social acceptability and name and recognize various social typecasts.

**5. Film (Documentary)**

***Bully***

**Directed by Sundance and Lee Hirsch**

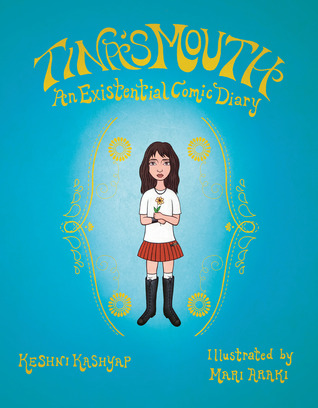
**Summary:**

The [documentary](http://www.thebullyproject.com/#/abouttheproject), directed by the Sundance and Emmy-award winning filmmaker Lee Hirsch, follows the lives of five families affected by bullying and their determination to make a difference.

**Rationale**:

This year, over 13 million American kids will be bullied at school, online, on the bus, at home, through their cell phones and on the streets of their towns, making it the most common form of violence young people in this country experience. BULLY is the first feature documentary film to show how we've all been affected by bullying, whether we've been victims, perpetrators or stood silent witness. It is a powerful film, which addresses an issue, which has become increasingly prevalent in our generation. Showing this film to students is a means of generating awareness and prevention both inside of school and out. The expectation is that students will better understand why bullying is such an problem, especially in secondary schools where social media tools such as smart phones enable the most extensive form of bullying: cyber bullying. This film will allow students to expand on the knowledge they have obtained about social dynamics and individual identity in a secondary school setting in the afore mentioned works by thinking critically about cause and effect rationales and the collective implications of typecasts and social constructs in real life situations.

**6. Graphic Novel**

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***Tina’s Mouth:***

***An Existential Comic Diary***

**by Keshni Kashyap and Mari Araki**

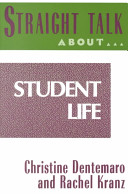
**Summary:**

Tina M., sophomore, is a wry observer of the cliques and mores of Yarborough Academy, and of the foibles of her Southern California intellectual Indian family. She's on a first-name basis with Jean-Paul Sartre, the result of an English honors class assignment to keep an “existential diary.”Keshni Kashyap’s compulsively readable graphic novel packs in existential high school drama—from Tina getting dumped by her smart-girl ally to a kiss on the mouth (Tina’s mouth, but not technically her first kiss) from a cute skateboarder, Neil Strumminger. And it memorably answers the pressing question: Can an English honors assignment be one fifteen-year-old girl’s path to enlightenment?

**Rationale:**

*Tina’s Mouth* features an intelligent and original female protagonist, who isn’t too proud to follow relatively predictable narrative lines, which exist in multitude for good reason. *Tina’s Mouth* isn’t afraid to be vulgar or dangerous, and yet it has an essential sweetness at its core. Its Indian-American eponymous heroine has an ethnic identity, but it doesn’t overwhelm the book. It does the standard thing of laying out the different high school cliques, but they feel individualized, rather than the usual taxonomy of jocks, cheerleaders, etc. And that’s a good way to look at the whole picture: *Tina’s Mouth* results from a singular worldview, shaped by specifics, not lazy generalities, which sets it in stark contrast to some of the earlier works students will have looked at. The uniqueness of this book will really enlightened student’s perception of individual identity apart from mainstream high school stereotypes.

**7. Non Fiction**

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***Straight Talk About Student Life***

**by Christine Dentemaro and Rachel Kranz**

**Summary:**

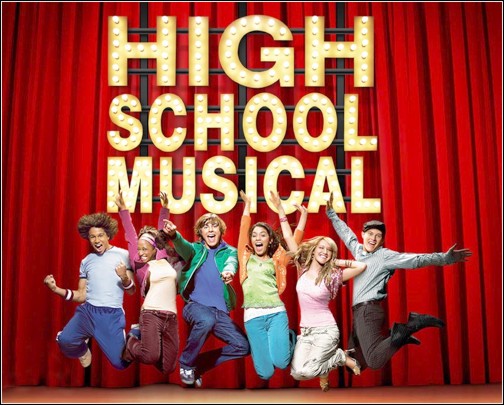
Recognizing that the teen years are a time of growth, transition, and tough choices, the Straight Talk series provides young readers with the knowledge they need to understand difficult issues, come to terms with their feelings, and make decisions that will work in the context of their lives. Without attempting to dictate answers, the Straight Talk series reminds its readers that all choices carry consequences. This book is thoroughly indexed and contains a directory of resources.

Coverage includes communication with teachers and other students, the pressures of schoolwork and the difficulties of social life, parental pressure to achieve, and the importance of extracurricular activities.

**Rationale:**

This text will introduce students to the idea that there are solutions to these types of issues. While it is important to familiarize students with the problematic nature of social syndicates in secondary schools, we as educators do not want to overwhelm students with issues of peer pressure, bullying, and self-identity without first allowing them to understand that there are support systems in place for managing these types of issues. This book will serve to inform both students and teachers of the role that each party can play in working to combat stressful issues in student life. Anti-bullying workshops and guests speakers are becoming more and more frequent in secondary schools, however this text will allow teachers to communicate support on a more personal level in a classroom setting, rather than in an assembly which may prove overwhelming to some students. This book serves as a useful ‘how to’ guide for navigating through high school. Furthermore, its suggestive answers and directory of resources can easily serve to generate useful classroom discussions about social dynamics and their collective impacts on individual identity.

**8. Musical**

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***High School Musical***

**By Disney**

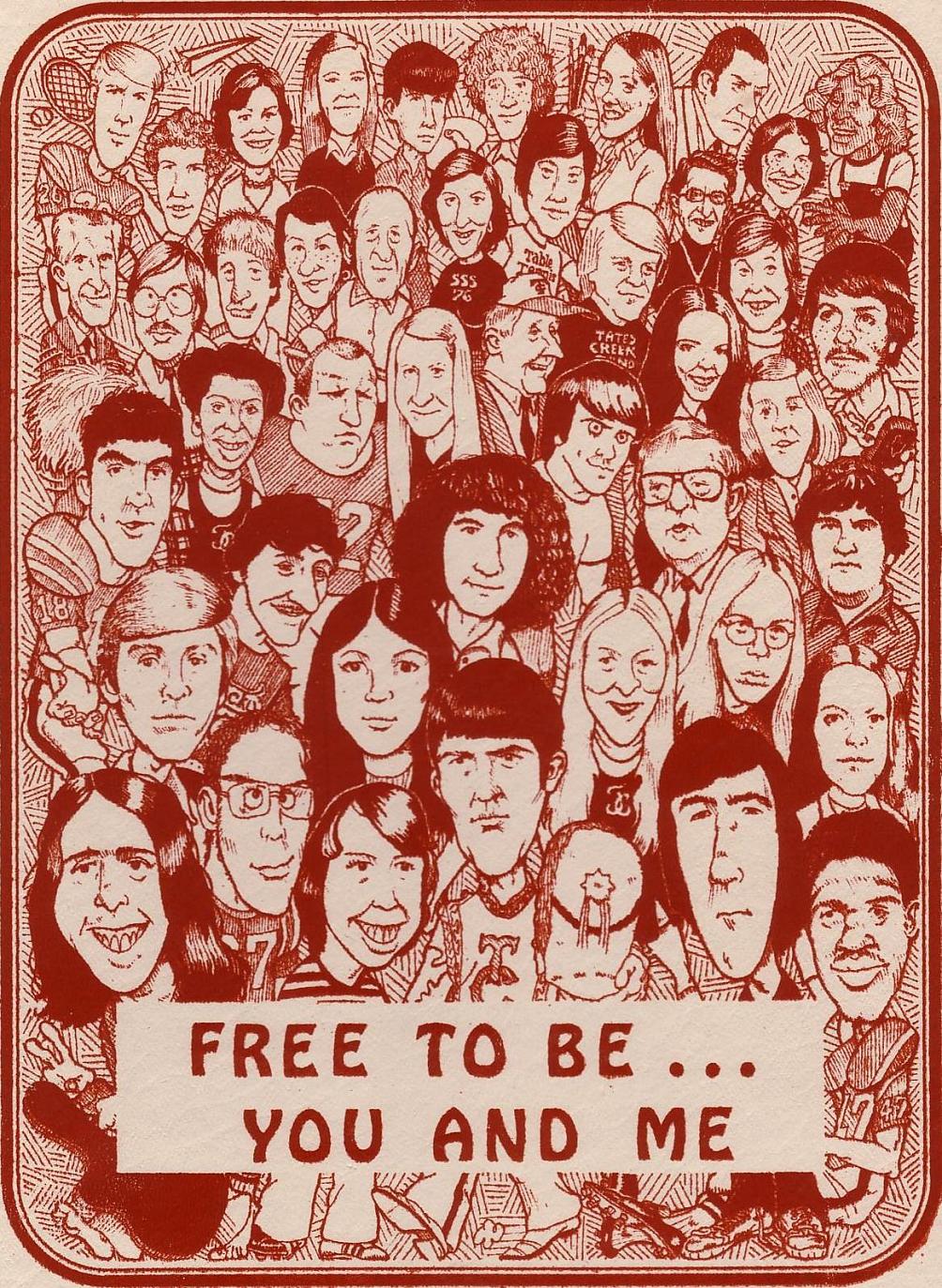
**Summary:**

Disney Channel Original Movie released in January of 2006.With a plot described by the author and numerous critics as a modern adaptation of [*Romeo & Juliet*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romeo_%26_Juliet). *High School Musical* is a story about two [high school](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_school) juniors from rival [cliques](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cliques) – Troy Bolton ([Zac Efron](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zac_Efron)), captain of the [basketball](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basketball) team, and Gabriella Montez ([Vanessa Hudgens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanessa_Hudgens)), a beautiful and shy transfer student who excels in [math](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathematics_education) and [science](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science). Together, they try out for the lead parts in their high school [musical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_theatre), and as a result, divide the school. Despite other students' attempts to thwart their dreams, Troy and Gabriella resist peer pressure and rivalry, inspiring others along the way not to "stick to the status quo". High school diva Sharpay Evans ([Ashley Tisdale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashley_Tisdale)) will do anything to sabotage the friendship between Troy and Gabriella and also get a lead in the school musical, assisted by her brother Ryan ([Lucas Grabeel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucas_Grabeel)).

**Rationale:**

*High School Musical* is a Disney Channel original movie which has often been described by critics as modern day *Romeo and Juliet* story, but for the purpose of this anthology it is a useful source in assessing the often idealized and harmonious atmosphere of high school life as depicted in movies, tv shows, comics etc. Many of us would identify countless inaccuracies with this type of account of high school life and yet it is so widely received by audiences. How does the harmonic nature of this film falsify the realities of high school life? How honest is the films account of exclusion in schools through socially constructed cliques and groups? What type of mass message is this film communicating about high school in general? Is there merit in the musical’s attempt to account for difference? Or is it merely superficial? This is the type of thinking a source of this nature could perpetuate amongst students when examining character typecasts and individual identity in the high school spectrum.

**9. Yearbooks as Text**

***Class of 20..?? High School Yearbooks***

**Summary:**

A documentary, memorial, or historical book published every year, containing information about the previous year.A usually bound publication compiled by the graduating class of a school or college, recording the year's events and typically containing photographs of students and faculty.

**Rationale:**

High school yearbooks from any generation would be an extremely useful tool in assessing the social constructs and dynamics that exist in a secondary school setting. Yearbook innately perpetuate stereotypes by classifying students according to the clubs they belong to, sports teams they played for and friends they associated with. Pages such as most likely to…. only further promote the typecasting of one’s peers. Therefore, in an assessment of where individual identity falls on the greater context of the high school spectrum, yearbooks are a useful tool in assessing stereotypes, social dynamics and overall classifications of the general student body. How do yearbooks account for meaningful reflections on high school without creating visible classifications and exclusions? Do the combined images and texts accurately account for the collective student experience? Or are yearbooks exclusive in nature?

**10. Social Media**

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**YouTube: Broadcast Yourself**

**Summary:**

**YouTube** is a [video-sharing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_hosting_service) website, created by three former [PayPal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PayPal) employees in February 2005, on which users can upload, view and share videos.[The company is based in [San Bruno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Bruno,_California), California, and uses [Adobe Flash Video](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_Video) and [HTML5](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTML5) technology to display a wide variety of [user-generated](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User-generated_content) video content, including movie [clips](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_clip), TV clips, and music videos, as well as amateur content such as [video blogging](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_blogging) and short original video.

**Rationale:**

Social media forms are immensely prevalent throughout secondary school institutions and are frequently the topics of conversation amongst teens. YouTube in particular is one source that is frequently used to perpetuate the types of peer stereotypes that exist in high schools. For the purpose of this anthology three specific uses of YouTube are especially relevant: public personalization, cyber bullying and public awareness. YouTube has frequently served as a platform for out-casted students to express their creativity, desperation or just general frustrations to whoever is willing to listen. Cry for help videos wherein a bullied student details their torture are not uncommon. This type of personalization is a powerful means of viral communication. Additionally, YouTube has also been used in a malicious fashion by students who aim to humiliate and degrade publicly one or more of their peers. YouTube is one of the fastest growing outlets for cyber bulling on the web. Which leads to its third relevant use- creating awareness. YouTube has recently become an outlet for many powerful anti-bullying messages made by youth and adolescents who say enough is enough. So what role does YouTube play in perpetuating stereotypes enforced by bullies? How does its extensive online impact threaten or promote individual identity? How has its influence impacted secondary school dynamics?